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Suspicion and Trust in The Shop on Main Street

Through Slavic film analysis class, I have come to notice subtle and not so subtle ways in which a foreign movie is made. In analyzing the film “The Shop on Main Street” a little background on the writer and directors give a better insight about the film and the Slavic people it represents. I feel the writer and directors were trying to show that people are generally caring toward one another. Circumstances beyond an individual’s control can break bonds that can never be repaired. To support this view, I will give a brief background on the writer and directors of the film and how war affected their lives in such a way to illustrate those feelings on film. I will discuss the choice of film stock and shooting techniques to how the actors interact with each other on screen.

The writer of the novel in which he turned into a screenplay is Lasislav Grossman. He was born in Czechoslovakia in 1921, and lived there throughout much of his life. He left Czechoslovakia after the Soviet invasion and moved to Israel until his death in 1981 (The Shop). Grossman places the story in the Slovak Republic, which has a mix of German, Slavic, Jewish, and Polish people who have worked, married and lived among each other for years. Of the two directors, Jan Kadar’s parents and sister were killed at the Auschwitz concentration camp during World War II (The Shop). Co-Director Elmar Klos was born in the Austro-Hungarian Empire that is now present-day Czech Republic. He spent his life there and finally died in Prague in 1993 at the age of 83

(The Shop). All three men involved with the film lived during this trying time of WWII. The film was made in 1965, twenty years after the war ended. This allowed the writer and directors around twenty years to reflect more on the emotions and lasting effects of war on Czechoslovakia people. One trait that is evident is the guardedness and suspicious nature of the characters. In choosing to make this film there was a conscious decision to use black and white film stock as opposed to color film stock. In 1965, many films were being made in color and this would be very striking to the viewer of the movie. The use of black and white gives a feel of one dimension with very strong contrast. It is hard to feel warmth through black and white film and the images are timeless. War has the same effect on the mind. Wars are something you would like to forget but are unable to.

The film starts out on a nice sunny day with a stork flying over the city. Once the bird perches high on a tower, we start to get a closer look at the town and the people. With an establishing high angle long shot with deep focus overlooking a small courtyard, we see prisoners exercising. The shot pans to the right just over the roof of the prison to show Main Street with the shops and bustling activity. The following shot is a jump cut to a band playing and children watching. As the camera lowers to a low angle shot, we look toward the clock tower in the town square with women and men leisurely walking, talking, smiling and gesturing to one other in greeting. The crowd of people is all wearing its Sunday best. Women are wearing fancy dresses and the rich men wearing nice suits to the manual labor wearing his nice shirt and pants. The service men are in uniform and so are the religious scholars, as well as young children with their parents. Upper class among the poor, service men among civilian, young among the old, religious affiliation by means of dress or labels. Every one is getting along and having a nice day. The image

is of a beautiful summer day and how town life could be fun and happy. The town is in Czechoslovakia but due to an agreement with Germany, the town would be protected from Russia but would have to give control to Germans. Monsignor Tiso was a political leader and in 1939 Slovakia declared its independence and became the Slovak Republic. To keep the peace between Germany and the local radicals in the Slavic government the Salzburg Compromise in 1940 was reached. The Slovak government enacted the “Jewish Code” in 1941. This was a legal foundation to take Jewish property and in 1942 reached an agreement with the Germans to start deporting Jews to German-run concentration camps (The World). Hitler’s army was occupying the region and the area is declared Slovakstatt. The persecution policy was adopted by the Tis regime and it is on the eve of 1942.

Our story starts out with an unassuming man named Antonin “Tono” Brtko pulling his dog “Essenc” home in a wagon from work. He is stopped at a rail crossing in which a train is hauling heavy artillery and servicemen. A medium close shot of him starts to tell the story of suspicion as you can see the expression on his face as he sees what the train is hauling. The train cars are hauling heavy military equipment and boxcars full of army men. Once the train passes, the last rail car has a man playing music on a couch. Tono smirks and shakes his head at the contradiction of images. Once home, his wife Evelynna arrives. He asks Evelynna specifics about a newspaper reports on the war but she is not interested. She just wants the money he made and is impressed with the tower the town is building in the square. Tono is unimpressed with the tower for its propaganda influences and has accepted some pigeons to make up the difference in money, which does not please his wife. This sets up a sense that the two have different priorities and do

not see eye to eye. His wife would love to have more money to buy things and Tono is happy how things are. Evelyn wants him to see if her brother-in-law Markus Kolkotsky will give him work. He is the town commander and has the authority to process this request. The use of a tightly framed medium shot lends meaningful importance to the exchange because it provides a good read on facial expressions. Tono and his wife argue over politics and he calls her a fascist and states that he is not a parrot that repeats what it hears. She says that he thinks his arm might go numb if he had to raise it in the German greeting. This set a personal suspicion between husband and wife: does one truly know the other? His wife is already arguing over the thought of money and social prestige, so what would she do if she had it? They already have a nice home and he is self-employed. What would happen if things change? Would it be for the better or would it be for the worse? What would you do if your life or property depended on it?

As Tono heads back to town with his dog Essenc, the camera has a long shot with deep focus each time he leaves or thinks about his wife. This is a cinematic way to evoke feelings of wanting to flee or distancing one from harm. When he is walking on to town he has a distressed look on his face and he is staring at the ground. He sings a song about “dress myself to look real smart, for my beloved, my sweetheart” as seen from a medium close camera shot. As he walks toward the camera it pans left to follow him with a medium close shot of his back. He stops singing and scratches his head then says, “To hell with her... she keeps ordering me around.” Again the camera goes into a fixed long shot with Tono walking away from the camera as to avoid harm, which is implying it is his mad wife. The following shot is a tracking shot of Tono going down the street; he passes a wall with street names on it. The use of the medium shot gives a sense of

comfort and familiarity along with him doing hopscotch like a kid. Once Tono is in town, a shop owner named Geza wants to talk to him. In doing so the actors look around to see who is watching then the camera goes into a medium close shot where the shop owner is whispering into Tono ear. The sense of closeness in a tightly framed shot with the troubled looks in their eyes set a feel of suspicion. What was said is that Geza does not approve of the fascist tower and encourages Tono to not get involved. As a business owner himself Geza would have suspicions about what is going to happen to his shop. Hearing the local gossip and being able to see who is spending money and on what puts him in a knowledgeable position. He is in a good position to make money but knowing how the Germans are taking what they want he might not be safe even though is not a Jew.

Tono goes over to the tower and talks with Mr. Kuchar. They have an interaction about the tower and how people are making good money building it. Tono has no interest in getting involved. They notice the brother-in law coming down the street. The camera goes to a two person medium close shot of Tono and Mr. Kuchar. There is two distinct looks on each mans face. Mr. Kuchar has a look of astonishment how easily the brother-in-law has taken to his new position and Tono has a look of distrust. Tono wants nothing to do with his brother-in-law and even implies he can go to the devil. Mr. Kuchar is now behind a fence, which is a visual foreshadowing of his future imprisonment, and continues to talk. He is impressed by how fat the brother-in-law has become and implies that in time, Tono will change his mind also. He states if he had a brother-in-law as a commander he would take a cushy job. Tono is firm in his belief, and neither money nor a cushy job would change him. Here you have the position of a commander able to

change your life. What would one do if given the chance? A seed of suspicion has been planted. Again, the camera uses a medium shot to show the suspicion on Tono's face and in his eyes. As he leaves the scene, the camera pans right with a long take and stay fixed with deep focus. Tono walks away with his back to the camera again into a long shot as he distances himself from fascism like the scene with his wife and the thought of her on the way to town.

There is a dinner party at Tono's home with his wife, the brother-in-law, and sister-in-law. The brother-in-law and sister-in-law stop in unexpectedly with food and gifts. The wife's demeanor changes to ecstatic and everyone is excited but Tono. The sisters are so enamored by the material things and by their reflections in a mirror that an iron catches the clothes on fire. That is ironic that the clothes that are needed to wear for work and which were important yesterday, were ruined by what things might be gotten with wealth in the future. At dinner, Tono is framed with an over the shoulder medium shot with deep focus and the other three are framed together to give suspicion that the brother and sister-in-law and wife all think alike and have the same values. This is where Tono gets the paperwork to run the shop on Main Street. A Jewish woman owns the shop that is now being taken over by the Germans. The brother-in-law is under suspicion due to Tono's lack of political involvement and he is there to help persuade Tono to take the job. Tono is given a gold cigarette case in which this is his first look into a mirror, which he is partially shown, on the inside of the case. Is this gift truly free, or is it how he might be bought into doing things until it is too late to turn back? The gesture of giving and receiving a gift now takes on a suspicious undertone. Tono still questions his brother-in-law's true intentions as a town commander.

Tono is well dressed for the first day of work. Before he enters the shop, he looks into the display window. There he views a full image of his face as if somehow he has changed appearance and this is the new face of a shop owner. Tono enters the shop and tries to explain the situation to the old lady who owns the shop. During their conversation, Mr. Kuchar whom Tono was talking to yesterday about his brother-in-law in the town square arrives to check on the old lady. He is a non-Jew and served with her husband in the war. All three are contained within a medium shot and heavy contrast and back lighting. Mr. Kuchar reads the paperwork and comes up with a solution to fix the situation. All three are looking at each other for answers but the look of confusion on Tono's face suggests that he might be suspicious at first. Mr. Kuchar puts Tono at ease and explains that the store makes no money and a group of Jews has been supporting her for years. They will keep things as usual and pay Tono moneys that he would be making as owner.

Tono heads to the barbershop to meet with Mr. Kuchar about their business arrangement a few days later. The barber is giving Mr. Kuchar a shave. Arriving before Tono was Piti-Baci who is the town crier. There is a medium shot with deep focus to an eye line view of everyone in the barbershop, where you can see in the mirrors everyone checking each other out. The barbershop owner is a Jew, along with Mr. Kuchar who is a non Jew but helping Jews out of kindness. This will get you in trouble with the Germans if they would find out. Tono is in a gray area where he is not actually helping the Jewish lady but he has not really taken over the shop like he should either. Piti's job is on the line as he sees the Germans installing loud speakers to notify the town over a public PA system instead of using him as the town crier. This use of the shot and editing is building

on how complicated life is. People you have talked to and trusted for years are potential trouble. You think you see the man in front of you, but there is two more behind your back you did not see. Wanting to discuss private matters, the barber asks Piti if he would come back tomorrow. Piti takes extreme offence to this and says he was here before Tono. Tono is new to this sneakiness and behind closed-door suaveness and watches the heated exchange. The shot of the four men in the barbershop is a high angle long shot with deep focus. The main subject, Piti, is center framed. The barber and Mr. Kuchar are framed far right together and Tono far left. Tono looks very scared with hands and feet crossed, with his legs tucked up underneath him while he sits on a bench. Tono looks like a scolded school child and very uncomfortable. Piti is yelling, "You think I'm not onto your escapades?" This cast suspicion among all if anything were to happen. Piti saying as he leaving "I know everything, I tell you! I'll report you! And You!" I'll report the whole lot of you! And get paid for it." Piti steps out then returns and says he won't say a word. What's in it for him anyway, he says. This is an example that maybe money is not his driving factor, but what is? Everyone has a price but what is it? Is it food, power, money, status, respect, or life?

Things are getting stressful. Tono is home one night and his wife is saying nasty thing about Rozalia the shop owner and using a lot of anti-Semitic innuendos. This is the first time you see Tono get angry and he slaps around his wife for being so mean. As he is slapping her, she pleads saying, "I'll keep quit, I'll keep quit, I won't say a word". This action is very unlike him and he goes to town and gets drunk. He sleeps it off in Mrs. Lautmannová's shop. During the night he has a dream sequence. The camera is fixed and a medium long shot is used with racking focus to go from the reflection in the door glass

to where the scene is flooded with light and both the old woman and Tono are in focus and he is in a dress suit and she is dressed in a beautiful dress. The front doors magically open and they float out to a heaven like scene with bright white skies, white buildings, white trees, and white grass. The camera pans left and there is non-diegetic polka music playing as they are framed in a medium shot in the town square with no one around. The voices are diegetic sound where the actors are hearing their conversation through their thoughts without talking. Tono keeps saying how quiet it is. They are going back and forth in conversation as to if this is a dream. Rozalia the shop owner tells him it is not and this is real. She tells him that his peaceful heart is a gift from God. Tono tells her she sounds like a prophet. He is telling her he has always liked her and being able to say so it's like a weight has been lifted off his heart. Rozalia says, "We all have our sorrows. We all know the past- and no one knows the future." Tono says the thing he feared most was the tower. That's when Rozalia says, "Don't you worry, my boy! Fear is the root of all evil!" "Once we are no longer afraid of each other there is no evil". Heaven and reality are two different places in which we will live. On earth we must do what we think is right at a certain point in time under specific conditions. Not all the decisions made are right or sometimes they might like to be changed. During war the ones that did not make it and went to heaven know the truth and what is pure in one's heart. As for the living, it is time that gives insight into someone's heart or motives.

This is the message the writer and directors wanted to explain in this beautiful black and white film about the struggles of the Slovak people and how suspicion and distrust was bred. The tower is no longer there and it is hard to remember that far back. What is suspicion and what form does it take? After twenty years of reflection it was time

to let go of something we were not sure of. It was a time and a place but does not have to be the future. Sometimes things do not turn out like we want or they should, but only we know what are pure intensions are and what is truly inside our hearts.